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Dear Van,

I want to thank you for once again taking the time to respond to one of my columns in Pride. Regarding the May 11th issue, I'd like to try to clear up some misunderstanding which I think caused your major objection to some points I made.

The first and most important point is that I did not say that "the major cause of Lesbian separatism is the sexist language used by Gay men." Nor did I mean to imply that. In fact, I went out of my way to say that separatism (whether lesbian or any other kind) is very often helpful and meets special needs of the separatist group (s). However, I did point out that when separatism is the result of antagonism between opposing groups it can be harmful. Having thus narrowed the topic to separatism that results from antagonism, I stated that "a" major cause (not "the" major cause) of antagonism is sexist language. That is an important distinction and one that I was careful to make. I'm really surprised that you missed it, Van.

Sexist language is only one form of sexism, to be sure, but it is very prevalent among certain circles of gay men. In writing about it, I was aware that some might see it as an indictment of all gay men no matter how carefully it was worded. But I hoped that the men to whom it did not apply would not be offended. I assumed that the men to whom it did apply would be defensive, but hoped that it would at least plant a seed for change in a few, or at least cause some folks to question themselves or think about something they hadn't thought about before.

I agree with you that many men (especially gay men) are working on their sexism. I believe myself and you to be among them, and I was therefore surprised at your response. But even in your letter to Pride you admit that "in some groups it (sexist language) runs rampant". Those were the groups to whom I was referring.

The series of articles that I did on sexist words was triggered by several very embarrassing experiences over the past few months when I had taken friends (male, female, gay, and non-gay) to gay functions as my guests and was appalled to hear the very words which I spoke of in my column used repeatedly, not only by the audience, but by people at the podium. Such usage was obviously acceptable to the overwhelmingly male audiences in each case, because they laughed, cheered, or applauded. On one such occasion, one of my guests, who happened to be a gay male, said, "If I wasn't with you, Jess, I'd have walked out long ago."

It was this and similar experiences that made me realize that it was time to begin some open discussion on these issues, and maybe the best way to affect a change was to explain in what I hoped would be a non-threatening manner why certain terms are offensive. I am convinced that few people who use sexist words mean any harm, nor have they ever given a second thought to the implications of their words.

Therefore, I attempted (apparently unsuccessfully) to word my argument so as not to be an attack on any particular person or group (male, female, gay or non-gay) but rather a discussion of certain selected (not all) sexist words that seem particularly divisive. The examples that I used involved gay men because I assumed that the readers were most likely to be gay men. (You may have noticed that in my most recent column, May 25th, the example I cited was one where a gay man calls a non-gay man on his sexist language.)

My question about why gay men don't ever call each other bastards, was not meant for one moment to suggest that they should call each other bastards. It really didn't occur to me that any one would take that meaning out of it. Rather, I was pointing out the fact that "bastard" (while it is somewhat equivalent to "bitch") is not a female identified word, but most (though not all) of the other put-down words are. You are quite right in your comments about the use of words like "fucker", "motherfucker", and "cocksucker". But they seem to originate from a slightly different form of sexism than I was talking about. Such words do carry some heavy messages about the way one feels about ones's own sexuality or sexual expression in general. That might be a subject for a whole article by itself.

Van, I want you to know that your comments are most welcome whether they are in agreement or in opposition. The dialog that they stimulate is healthy for us all. I hope you will continue to comment.

Yours in the struggle,

Jess

Jess Jessop